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*Chapter Ten*

# THE NUER LANGUAGE

## RESULTS OF STUDY

197 THE Nuer language in most points has some similarity to the other Nilotic languages, having many of the same sounds, but it is a distinct language in itself, and not an outgrowth of the others. Possibly it shows more similarity to the Dinka than to any other of the neighboring tongues.

212 Various systems have been used in reducing this language to writing, but no one system has been found which seemed to satisfy the different missions and the Government officials who were using a Nilotic language. So in April 1928 the Sudan Government called a conference at Rejaf, where representatives of the missions and governments engaged in work among the Nilotic tribes were present.

The Government had invited Professor Westermann of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures to prepare a system of certain signs to represent the unusual sounds of the Nilotic tongues. Professor Westermann was present and the new system was tested with the various natives at the conference who were present for that purpose from the different tribes.

Thus for the first time a common system was adopted for general use throughout all the Nilotic tribes wherever any effort is being made to reduce any of these languages to writing. This in itself is a big accomplishment, as all missions as well as all Government officials have accepted the system.

872 A standard course of study for the elementary schools was also adopted.

● 214 The Nuer language so far has not been very largely

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transmitted to paper. The two missions working among the Nuer have a limited number of school-books printed in this language. The American Mission has six readers, one of which contains much folk-lore. They also have a translation of Dr. Mary Blacklock's book on *Hygiene*. But the white man when he arrives in Nuerland has but little to help him to a quick understanding of the language. A Nuer-English dictionary has just been published, and an English-Nuer dictionary will soon be ready for the publisher. In each a few pages of Nuer grammar has been included. But so far the white man has had to extract his knowledge of the language from the Nuer himself, and this process takes time—and patience.

The Nuer language as I have found it has an extensive vocabulary. I have listed over 3,100 words in the above mentioned dictionary, many of them root-forms only, and I constantly find how limited my knowledge of the language is. One finds new words each day. It seems like an endless mine.

In working on this language distinctive points are noted.

The same forms are used for all genders in pronouns. A change of vowel or an additional vowel is common in forming the possessive of a noun. Many proper names are the same in both masculine and feminine cases, but the prefix *nyo-* or *nyan-* is always used with the feminine. The supply of adverbs seems inadequate, but possibly we have not discovered them all. Also the names of many virtues are lacking, and we frequently find that we need more adjectives. Change of inflection plays an important part in this language in making negative forms and plurals.

Nuer sentences are short. The Nuer seems to prefer a new sentence instead of using many connectives. He often states a fact, modifying it in the next sentence, e.g. 'Every one went away, I only was left.'